

2024 Impact Report



News & Events

Empty Bowls Gala Raises \$730,000 for Hunger Relief

PAGE 3



Community

Rooted in Unity:
Feeding Communities, Growing Local

PAGE 5



Finance

Maximizing Every Dollar to Help End Hunger

PAGE 6

Volunteers Boost Meal Production

Two dedicated Kitchen Collective volunteers at the Redwood Empire Food Bank have significantly enhanced the organization's meal preparation capabilities by purchasing a dough sheeter with their own funds. Bill and Jody each contributed half the cost of the equipment, improving kitchen efficiency dramatically.

The dough sheeter reduces preparation time from two and a half hours to just 45 minutes, allowing volunteers to create quiche crusts, galettes, pizzas, and other pastry bases quickly and easily. This upgrade will greatly benefit the On the Spot Nutrition program, which feeds 1,000 people daily.

With support from food donors like Central Milling and Straus Family Creamery, the kitchen can now expand its offerings. **"It allows us to be more creative and accept a wider variety of food donations,"** said the food bank's Executive Chef, Don Nolan. Food recipients have expressed their appreciation, calling to thank the food bank for the comforting meals made possible by this new equipment.



Volunteer Jody LaRocca, Chef Don Nolan, and volunteer Bill Conklin hard at work with the new dough sheeter.

Hunger Persists: Redwood Empire Food Bank Adapts to Ongoing Need



Young participant finds nourishment at one of the Redwood Empire Food Bank's School Pantry sites.

THE REDWOOD EMPIRE Food Bank continues to address the growing hunger crisis in Sonoma County. In 2024, the organization served 61,000 individuals monthly, up from 56,000 the previous year and 45,000 in 2022, highlighting a consistent upward trend since 2017.

Allison Goodwin, President & CEO, reflected on the challenges: "We've seen a continued rise in people needing our help, with an average of 3,300 new individuals turning to us each month. This persistent growth underscores the importance of our mission," she said.

The sustained demand stems from Sonoma County's high cost of living, coupled with rising food and gas prices. Many families have been pushed into food insecurity, especially after the expiration of pandemic-era benefits. These factors have created an unrelenting strain on households already struggling to make ends meet.

While community support has remained steady, the food bank faces the challenge of meeting ever-increasing needs. "We are incredibly grateful for our community's continued generosity," Goodwin emphasized. "However,

as demand continues to grow, we must plan for the future to ensure we can always say yes to those in need."

Operational efficiency is crucial as the food bank adapts to growing demands within spatial limitations. "We've optimized our current facility to its fullest potential, balancing swift turnover of perishables like produce, protein, and dairy with other essential activities," explained Alison Smith, Chief Operations Officer. "As we approach capacity in our operational hub, we remain committed to safety while seeking ways to accommodate further growth."

Smith emphasized, "Safety is our top priority. While we face space constraints in our current facility, we continue to innovate and create solutions that allow us to operate safely while meeting the current needs. We're exploring future solutions to expand capacity while upholding our rigorous safety standards. This ensures we can continue to meet increasing demand without ever compromising the security of our staff, volunteers, and the communities we serve."

The food bank is planning for the future. "We're looking ahead," Goodwin said. "By sharing our capacity and plans, we aim to secure support for both immediate needs and long-term food security."

"Community support is crucial in our efforts to create a hunger-free Sonoma County."

Despite the increased need and capacity limitations, the food bank remains committed to its mission of ending hunger through innovative programs and partnerships. "Community support is crucial in our efforts to create a hunger-free future for Sonoma County," Goodwin added.

As needs grow, the Redwood Empire Food Bank seeks support from donors, volunteers, and policymakers to address immediate and long-term food security goals. Through planning and community commitment, the organization aims to build a resilient system capable of meeting current and future challenges in the fight against hunger. 🌱



Allison Goodwin engages with a recipient during a food distribution at the Earle Baum Center of the Blind, part of the Redwood Empire Food Bank's Food for Independence program.

A Year of Transformation: Redwood Empire Food Bank's Journey in 2024 and Vision for 2025

By Allison Goodwin, President & CEO

AS I REFLECT ON 2024, I am filled with a profound sense of gratitude for the resilience and generosity of our community. This past year has been a testament to our collective strength in addressing food insecurity in Sonoma County and beyond. The challenges we faced were significant, but they also inspired us to innovate and adapt in ways that will shape our future.

One of the most rewarding aspects of this year has been witnessing the dedication and commitment of our team—employees, board members, nonprofit partners, and volunteers—who have embraced change with open arms. We tackled complex problems head-on and responded swiftly to the community's needs. The demand for food assistance increased more than we anticipated, yet we rose to the occasion. We operated within our budget while providing a variety of culturally relevant and seasonal produce through a client choice model, ensuring that those seeking help received not just food, but dignity.

As we move into 2025, I am excited to share our top four goals for the Redwood Empire Food Bank:

Expand Partnerships with Local Farms: We aim to strengthen our relationships with local farms to increase access to fresh produce, dairy, and protein. By sourcing locally, we can provide healthier options while supporting our regional agricultural community.

Cultivate Community Partnerships: Building a robust network of community partnerships, donors, and volunteers is vital. We will focus on education to demonstrate how contributions make a tangible impact on our mission to end hunger. By showing a bit of the magic behind the curtain, we hope to inspire more people to join us in this critical work.

Improve Internal Operations: We are committed to maximizing the effectiveness of our resources while reducing food waste and increasing operational sustainability. This includes optimizing food distribution logistics, offering client choice to minimize waste, and adopting eco-friendly practices like composting and gleaning produce into reusable containers.

Engage with the Public Sector: We will strengthen our engagement with public sector partners through relationship building and education. By providing data on hunger in Sonoma County and advocating for funding, we can ensure the sustainability of essential safety net services.

What I am most proud of this year is working at an organization that embraces change and innovation. The creativity and forward-thinking mindset of everyone at the Redwood Empire Food Bank has been remarkable. Despite the challenges we faced in procuring and providing more groceries, we maintained our commitment to serving those in need.

As we look ahead to 2025, I am filled with hope for what we can achieve together. Your support—whether through donations, volunteering, or advocacy—fuels our determination to create a hunger-free Sonoma County. Together, we can build a stronger, more resilient community where everyone has access to the nourishment they need to thrive.

Thank you for being an essential part of our mission. I look forward to the positive changes we will create together in the coming year! 🍎

**Make a lasting impact throughout the year as a monthly donor.
Become a Full Plate Partner today at refb.org/fpp**

LETTERS to the Editor

A Heartfelt Thanks From a Willits Senior

While I was lined up waiting in my car, one of your friendly helpers gave me a Carrot and Pineapple Tamale. When I got home, I steamed it and it was delicious! Thanks for your good work and helping with food expenses.

I am 73 years old and thankfully, getting by on a fixed income which is a challenge as prices keep going up. I have lived in the Willits area since the early '80's and worked full time at Howard Hospital for 28 years, until retirement and then part time as a private bookkeeper until very recently, when my hearing loss became a problem.

I feel very thankful to live in such a beautiful and supportive area during these tough times.

~ Diana H.

From Embarrassment and Pride to Gratitude

I was just laid off. I have 3 kids and my husband is currently in dialysis. When they say to find the silver lining, believe you me, I was trying HARD. Things were getting harder day by day. I kept telling myself it wasn't bad enough to come to the food bank. I didn't want to take food from anyone else. But as a mother, realizing your kids are missing out on certain foods and telling you dinner wasn't enough to keep the hunger away because you are too prideful... will really make your heart ache. So I set my pride aside. My friend told me to go to the veterans building in the morning, and so I went with the little gas I had. I contemplated staying in the car, so no one could see me. But realized I didn't have that luxury as my gas was already running low. So I got off. I stood in line, embarrassed, shy, and most importantly feeling alone.

But as I looked at the food line, I saw all of these volunteers, smiling, talking to the other people in line as if they were talking to a friend. But most of all, they weren't asking questions. Looking at me like I was gross. Or making fun of me. Which are all things I had already decided would happen. For the first time in a long time, I was just me. A woman getting groceries to bring home to my family. And so I thank that whole crew for helping me feel human again... it helped me finally find the silver lining.

~ Lucy D.

Thank You for Bringing Food to Oakridge

Thank you all for your service to Oakridge Senior Apts in Sonoma. I remember several years ago requesting your help at Oakridge. I am a senior who struggles with making ends meet. I would stand in line at La Luz or at St Leos then bring food to Oakridge residents. Thank you for delivering to Oakridge Apts and to the young man who took our request for deliveries. We all love all of you.

~ Sofia N.



Redwood Empire Food Bank and Mendo Food Network teams at the Annual Partner Conference. From left: Erika Carstensen, Amanda Friscia, Alison Smith, Mary Tinder, Jessica Hernandez, Lisi Horstman, Rachelle Sutherland.

Food Bank Highlights Healthy Eating at Annual Partner Conference

THE REDWOOD EMPIRE Food Bank hosted its annual partner conference in September 2024, drawing a significant turnout from its network of over 150 local hunger relief organizations. This year's event placed a strong emphasis on promoting healthy eating among food recipients.

A key focus of the conference was the importance of providing nutritious food to individuals in need. The food bank introduced attendees to valuable resources such as Healthy Eating Research,

which offers guidelines for categorizing charitable food options. This tool aids in creating a balanced provision of help (POH), ensuring recipients receive well-rounded, nutritious meals.

The Redwood Empire Food Bank's POH, typically weighing 35-40 pounds, primarily consists of protein, dairy, produce, and grains. The food bank encouraged its partners to use both donated and purchased food from the food bank to maintain this healthy balance in their distributions.

The conference also addressed food safety protocols, stressing the importance of proper training and certification for all staff and volunteers handling food. This commitment to safety extends to partner organizations, who are responsible for safe transportation and storage of food items.

The Redwood Empire Food Bank's annual conference plays a crucial role in aligning efforts to combat food insecurity while prioritizing nutrition and healthy eating in the communities they serve. 🍏

Empty Bowls Gala Raises Over \$730,000 for Hunger Relief

THE REDWOOD EMPIRE Food Bank hosted its annual Empty Bowls Gala on April 27, 2024, raising an impressive \$730,000 to support hunger relief.

The event, held at the food bank's warehouse on Brickway Boulevard in Santa Rosa, combined artistry, culinary excellence, and community spirit to address food insecurity.

Guests enjoyed a unique "warehouse chic" atmosphere, featuring demonstrations by local artists Michael Dickinson, Chris Landwehr, Kalia Kliban, and Jerry Kermode. The evening's highlights included a reception with cheeses by Gary Edwards of Sage Marketing, passed hors d'oeuvres and dinner prepared by Park Ave Catering's Chef Bruce Riezenman and Chef Ari Weiswasser, locally curated wines, and a silent auction. The auction showcased over 50 hand-crafted bowls created by talented local artisans, including Patrick McDonnell, Marge Margulies, and the late Jade Snow Wong.

Allison Goodwin, President & CEO of the food bank, expressed gratitude for the community's support, stating, "This event is a testament

to the power of collective action in addressing hunger in our community."

The success of Empty Bowls 2024 has set a high bar for next year's event, already scheduled for April 26, 2025. The funds raised will significantly boost the food bank's efforts to provide nutritious food to those in need across Sonoma County and beyond.

Those interested in sponsoring the event are invited to email Nick at nagius@refb.org. 🍏



Artist Michael Dickinson displays his glass-making techniques at the Redwood Empire Food Bank's Empty Bowls Gala.

Embracing Sustainability with Reusable Containers

In a significant move towards environmental sustainability, the Redwood Empire Food Bank has implemented the use of Reusable Plastic Containers (RPCs) in 2024, phasing out single-use mesh produce bags. This transition marks a substantial step in reducing the organization's environmental footprint while maintaining efficient food distribution operations.

The new RPCs, designed for hundreds of uses, are now employed at distribution sites to transport and dispense loose fruits and vegetables directly into recipients' vehicles. Redwood Empire Food Bank staff and volunteers manage these containers, which never leave the food bank's possession, ensuring their continued reuse across multiple sites and in warehouse operations.

This innovative system not only decreases microplastic pollution but also enhances the food bank's operational efficiency. The containers' ability to be unsnapped and folded flat when empty facilitates easy transportation between distribution sites, further minimizing environmental impact.

The Redwood Empire Food Bank's shift to RPCs demonstrates the organization's commitment to combining effective hunger relief with responsible environmental practices, setting a new standard in sustainable food distribution.

Inaugural Hot Rods for Hunger Relief Revs Up Community Support



Mike Bartholdy's 1969 Chevy Camaro SS won the coveted People's Choice Award.

The Redwood Empire Food Bank successfully hosted its first-ever "Hot Rods for Hunger Relief" car show on October 26, 2024, at their Santa Rosa facility. The event combined automotive enthusiasm with community support for the food bank's mission to end hunger.

Featuring an array of classic cars, hot rods, and unique vehicles, the show attracted car enthusiasts and families alike. Attendees enjoyed food trucks, beverages from local vendors, and complimentary tours of the food bank. The event also included a Trunk or Treat Halloween celebration and a People's Choice Award for favorite vehicles.

The event successfully raised awareness and funds for the Redwood Empire Food Bank's hunger relief efforts. Shana Koehler, Community Engagement Associate, expressed enthusiasm for the community's response and hinted at plans to make it an annual event, with organizers already seeking feedback to improve future editions.



Backstage at the Sonoma County Fair Junior Livestock Auction.

Sonoma County Fair Boosts Range to Table Program, Tackling Food Insecurity

THE RANGE TO TABLE program at the Redwood Empire Food Bank has experienced remarkable growth thanks to a dynamic partnership with the Sonoma County Fair. This collaboration has significantly expanded food donations while strengthening community ties in the fight against food insecurity in Sonoma County.

Founded over 20 years ago by Cheryl LaFranchi of Oak Ridge Angus, Range to Table was established to provide high-quality protein to individuals and families facing hunger. The program has long relied on generous donations from local ranchers, allowing the food bank to distribute locally sourced meat to those in need. However, it was not until 2024 that the Sonoma County Fair began actively collaborating with the food bank to enhance this initiative.

The Fair reached out to the Redwood Empire Food Bank and the Sonoma County Farm Bureau with a vision to increase livestock donations through their Junior Livestock Auctions. The Fair's proactive approach included early outreach to auction participants and close collaboration on

promotional materials aimed at raising awareness among local youth programs like 4H and Future Farmers of America (FFA). A food bank representative attended livestock auctions to promote the program and engage with bidders. Before bidding commenced, fair officials announced donation options to auction participants.

The results were extraordinary; livestock donations surged to 54 animals in 2024—a staggering 440% increase from just 10 animals donated in 2023. This translated into more than 13,600 servings of locally raised meat for community members facing hunger.

Colin Davidson, Food Resources Manager at the Redwood Empire Food Bank, emphasized the partnership's transformative nature: "The Sonoma County Fair's initiative has been pivotal for our Range to Table program. Their enthusiasm and dedication have significantly raised awareness about food insecurity in our community."

The success of the Range to Table program was made possible by the generous contributions of key stakeholders. American AgCredit stepped

up to sponsor processing costs for donated livestock, while Buds Meats offered discounted rates for processing services. And a thanks to Sonoma County Meat, a long-time partner in the program. This vital support was complemented by the generosity of several donors who purchased livestock specifically for the program. This collaborative effort highlights how various community members can come together for a common cause.



Young participant happily accepts protein at a Redwood Empire Food Bank distribution site.

Hope Marshall, Premium & Exhibit Coordinator at the Sonoma County Fair, noted, "It's an incredible opportunity for our community to support our youth livestock program while providing high-quality meat products for neighbors facing food insecurity."

The partnership exemplifies how local food systems can effectively address community needs while supporting youth development through agricultural programs. By connecting local ranchers directly with consumers in need, it showcases a sustainable model for food distribution.

Looking ahead, the Redwood Empire Food Bank plans to deepen its collaboration with 4H and FFA programs, focusing on education and volunteer opportunities at the food bank. This initiative aims to engage young agricultural enthusiasts in hunger relief efforts, fostering a new generation of community-minded leaders. Additionally, the food bank is committed to strengthening its partnerships with the Fair and other agricultural community partners, ensuring a sustainable and impactful Range to Table program for years to come.

The growth of the Range to Table program through this partnership not only addresses immediate food needs but also strengthens community bonds and raises awareness about food insecurity in Sonoma County. By working together, these organizations are creating a more resilient local food system that benefits everyone involved.

For more information or to get involved with the Redwood Empire Food Bank's Range to Table program, visit refb.org/range-to-table.



Redwood Empire Food Bank's Community Engagement Associate, Shana Koehler, collects donated food from the first Porch to Plate program.

Food Bank Launches Inaugural Porch to Plate Program

The Redwood Empire Food Bank has successfully launched its inaugural Porch to Plate food drive program in the Oakmont neighborhood. Designed to make donating food easier, this quarterly initiative encourages residents to contribute non-perishable items without leaving their homes.

Participants receive a bag on their porch, fill it with food from their pantry or purchased items, and have it picked up on a scheduled date. In its first drive, the program collected 167 bags of groceries, totaling 1,860 pounds of food—equivalent to 1,550 meals for community members in need.

The Porch to Plate program aims to engage Sonoma County residents in the fight against hunger while fostering community spirit. The food bank is eager to expand this initiative into other neighborhoods in the future. Those interested in starting Porch to Plate in their area can email Shana at skoehler@refb.org for more information.



Clockwise from top left: Winter Sister Farm, Coyote Family Farm, lettuce harvested before the rain, and after, at Paul's Produce.



Redwood Empire Food Bank Turns Flood Threat into Community Bounty

IN A REMARKABLE DISPLAY of community collaboration, the Redwood Empire Food Bank and FEED Sonoma have transformed a potential agricultural crisis into an opportunity to feed those in need. Faced with an impending atmospheric river and flood warnings, local farmers in Sebastopol, Petaluma, Healdsburg, and Sonoma rushed to harvest their crops on November 19th.

Using funds from the Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) program, the food bank swiftly agreed to purchase the emergency harvest through FEED Sonoma, a local food hub. This quick action not only saved crops

from potential flood damage but also ensured a fresh supply of local produce for community distribution.

Alison Smith, Chief Operations Officer for the food bank, expressed enthusiasm for the initiative. “We’re thrilled to support our local farms while simultaneously increasing our ability to serve

the community,” she said. “This emergency purchase not only preserves crops that might have been lost but also ensures our neighbors have access to fresh, locally-grown produce.”

The rescued harvest arrived at the food bank on November 22nd and was distributed to the community on Novem-

ber 25th. This rapid response highlights the resilience of the local food system and the power of community collaboration in the face of challenging weather conditions.

Local farmers expressed gratitude for the support, noting that this purchase made it possible to salvage crops that would have otherwise been lost to flooding. The initiative not only supports the local agricultural economy but also strengthens the bond between farmers and the community they feed.

The LFPA program, a \$400 million USDA initiative, aims to strengthen local food systems and support socially disadvantaged farmers while providing fresh, culturally relevant food to underserved communities. In California, over \$51 million has been allocated for this program over two years.

As the region faces the challenges of extreme weather, this story serves as a heartening example of how programs like LFPA can be leveraged to create win-win situations for farmers, food banks, and the community at large. 🌱

Rooted in Unity: Feeding Communities, Growing Local

On August 19, 2024, the Redwood Empire Food Bank hosted a groundbreaking event celebrating the Farms Together program, California’s iteration of the USDA’s Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA). The event brought together food banks, state leaders, and local farmers to discuss the program’s success and future potential.

Farms Together, a collaborative effort led by the California Association of Food Banks (CAFB), Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF), and Fresh Approach, has made significant strides in connecting small, socially disadvantaged farms with food banks across the

state. The program, initially seed-funded by the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA), has since expanded with support from the California Department of Social Services (CDSS).

The impact of Farms Together has been substantial. In 2024 alone, the program purchased approximately 2.17 million pounds of produce, providing about 1.8 million meals to Californians in need. Moreover, it has invested \$5.2 million in small farms and local food businesses, strengthening regional economies and food systems.

Allison Goodwin, President & CEO of the Redwood Empire Food Bank, emphasized the program’s importance: “Working with FEED as part of the Farms Together program has amplified our ability to provide a healthy, nutritious, and hyper-local element to our provision of help for the communities we serve.”

The event featured a roundtable discussion with key stakeholders, including CDFA Secretary Karen Ross, CDSS Deputy Director Alexis Fernández Garcia, and representatives from various food banks and farming organizations. Participants explored



opportunities and challenges facing the program, as well as strategies to ensure its continuation beyond current funding cycles.

As the Farms Together program continues to

grow, it stands as a model for building resilient regional food systems and bridging the gap between small, local farms and food banks, ultimately working towards a healthier, more food-secure California.

“This program has amplified our ability to provide a healthy, nutritious, and hyper-local element to our provision of help for the communities we serve.” - Allison Goodwin, President & CEO

2024
Finance News

In the world of finance, making every dollar count is a true art. The Redwood Empire Food Bank has mastered this art, turning each dollar received into a powerful force in the effort to End Hunger in Our Community.

FOR EVERY \$1 RECEIVED, WE'RE ABLE TO PROVIDE \$3 WORTH OF HEALTHY FOOD

\$74.5 MILLION — OF FOOD DISTRIBUTED —

EQUIVALENT TO 25.8 MILLION MEALS

3,800 COMMUNITY FOOD DISTRIBUTIONS
142,000 PEOPLE SERVED

11,000 DEDICATED VOLUNTEERS

150,000 HOURS SERVED

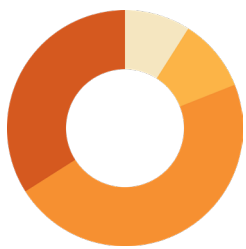
110 MAJOR FOOD DONORS

10,000 INDIVIDUAL MONETARY DONORS

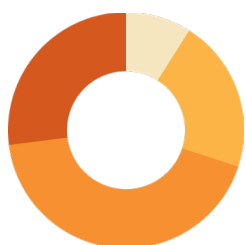
150 HUNGER RELIEF PARTNERS

82 HARD-WORKING STAFF

Our Provision of Help



Offering: 47% produce, 9% protein, 10% dairy, 34% dry goods



Source: 43% purchased produce, 9% purchased staples, 27% donated food, 21% government (USDA) food

Value of healthy groceries provided in 2024:

\$74.5M



Initiatives

Neighborhood Hunger Network

142,000 Individuals served
3,300 New Individuals per month
\$50.5M Value of food provided
17.6M Meal equivalent provided

Including:

Every Child, Every Day

48,000 Children served

Senior Security

15,600 Seniors served
3,000 Veterans served

On the Spot Nutrition

Healthy prepared snacks for participants
12 Volunteers preparing snacks daily
5,000 Healthy Snacks provided each week

Hunger Relief Partners

\$24M Value of food provided to our partner network
8.2M Meal equivalent provided to our partner network



Revenue

Individual Donations: **\$11,721,000**
Grants and Foundation Support: **\$739,000**
Corporate Contributions: **\$1,739,000**
Government Contracts: **\$4,336,000**
Other Revenue: **\$3,564,000**
Total Revenue: \$22,099,000
Donated Food: **\$41,854,000**

Funding Breakdown
53% Individual donations
20% Government Contracts
16% Other Revenue
11% Corporations & Foundations

Expenses Breakdown
93% Hunger Relief Programs
7% General Operating Expenses

Redwood Empire Food Bank Expands Food for Independence Program

The Redwood Empire Food Bank has made significant strides in its Food for Independence (FFI) program, which aims to support individuals with disabilities in the community. Launched as a pilot in August 2023, the program has grown to serve three locations, adapting to the unique needs of participants.

Initially partnering with the Earle Baum Center of the Blind, the food bank expanded the program to include North Bay Industries (NBI) and Becoming Independent (BI). These partnerships allow the food bank to reach a diverse group of individuals with disabilities, including those with sight loss, intellectual and developmental disabilities, and those in vocational training programs.

The FFI program has evolved based on participant feedback and observed needs. The food bank shifted from bi-monthly to weekly distributions, allowing participants more frequent access to food resources. The menu has been tailored to accommodate various cooking abilities, diet preferences, and transportation challenges. The new Provision of Help (POH) includes a variety of produce, staple raw items, and ready-to-eat options, with the total weight kept to about 15 pounds or less for ease of transport.



The Redwood Empire Food Bank has learned valuable lessons during the pilot phase, including the importance of offering lower-sugar foods and smaller packaging sizes to cater to the many single-person households served. The program now provides seven produce varieties weekly, along with items such as eggs, frozen protein in small portions, milk, and bread.

Collaboration with partner organizations has been crucial to the program's success. These partnerships help with distribution logistics, participant communication, and providing cooking guidance. The program continues to evolve, with the food bank committed to learning, adapting, and finding the best ways to serve this community.

As the Food for Independence program grows, it exemplifies the Redwood Empire Food Bank's dedication to addressing food insecurity among diverse populations, tailoring its approach to meet the specific needs of individuals with disabilities in Sonoma County.

Above, participants at the Earle Baum Center of the Blind receiving food support from the food bank.

Innovative Partnership Takes Root: Novavine and Redwood Empire Food Bank Unite to Combat Hunger



Redwood Empire Food Bank's operations team checks out the gorgeous tomatillo plants at Novavine, getting a sneak peek at the fresh produce soon to be harvested for local families in need.

IN AN INNOVATIVE pilot collaboration, Novavine, a premium grapevine nursery in Santa Rosa, has partnered with the Redwood Empire Food Bank to address food insecurity and seasonal unemployment in Sonoma County. This unique initiative transforms Novavine's 3-acre greenhouse facility into a food production hub during its off-season, providing fresh, culturally relevant produce to those in need.

The pilot program uses Novavine's state-of-the-art greenhouses to grow vegetables and herbs when they're not being used for grapevine propagation. This innovative approach not only keeps Novavine's staff consistently employed throughout the year, but also significantly boosts the food bank's supply of fresh produce.

Alison Smith, Chief Operations Officer of the Redwood Empire Food Bank, emphasized the importance of this collaboration: "When we survey our clients and ask them what they really want to receive from us, the food items at the top of their list are not always readily available in our normal channels. So for Jay and his team to grow the things that the community is asking for—it couldn't be more perfect."

Jay Jensen, CEO of Novavine, described the variety of foods being grown: tomatillos, tomatoes, peppers, and cilantro. The produce is of exceptional quality, as

Colin Davidson, Food Resources Manager at the food bank, noted: "This is top-tier, restaurant-grade produce—exceptional quality rarely seen at food banks. It's truly remarkable."

times scale, which is our goal in the next year or two."

Currently, Jensen is funding the program himself but is exploring ways to expand it. "There is an opportunity to maybe find a grant or

"This is top-tier, restaurant-grade produce—exceptional quality rarely seen at food banks. It's truly remarkable."

Jensen's commitment to the program goes beyond just providing produce. This first year will keep 25 workers on the payroll instead of in the unemployment line, producing about 35,000 pounds of fresh food to be shared across five counties. Jensen is excited about the future potential: "It's exciting to imagine this on a 10

something that will help us just cover our costs. That's all we're trying to do here is just to have it be a win-win. If we can cover our costs, and the food bank can get some nice product, especially in the off-season, I think it works out well for everyone," he said.

As this pilot program continues to develop, it stands as a testament to the spirit of innovation and community support in Sonoma County. Smith added, "We can put this into a blueprint model and share it across our food bank network... It would be fantastic to replicate this across the country."

In November and December of 2024, the food bank received over 2,000 pounds of produce from the pilot program, marking a promising start to this innovative partnership that could revolutionize how food banks source fresh, high-quality produce while supporting local employment. 🌱



Food bank volunteer prepares produce from Novavine for food recipients.



Business

Innovative Partnership Takes Root: Novavine and Food Bank Unite to Combat Hunger

PAGE 7



Community

Food Bank Turns Flood Threat Into Community Bounty

PAGE 5



2024 Impact Report



Food 8



Above: Kim Caffrey, Partner Resources Manager, serves hors d'oeuvres at Savor the Mission. Below: Chef Don Nolan demonstrates meals from donated items; Patty Striniste, Chief People & Culture Officer, explains food distribution setup.

Redwood Empire Food Bank Hosts Inaugural “Savor the Mission” Event

THE REDWOOD EMPIRE Food Bank held its first-ever “Savor the Mission: A Tasting Tour” on November 14, 2024, offering dedicated contributors an exclusive behind-the-scenes look at the organization’s operations. The event, centered around the theme “Where Does Our Food Come From?”, combined culinary delights with educational insights into the food bank’s mission.

Guests were treated to a reception featuring hors d’oeuvres and champagne, followed by an immersive tour of the food bank’s facilities. Throughout the evening, attendees savored exquisite bites prepared by Executive Chef Don Nolan and his team of volunteers, paired with donated wines from local partners.

The tour included several stations, each highlighting a different aspect of the Redwood Empire Food Bank’s work:

Chef Don Nolan explained the Kitchen Collective’s role in transforming donated bulk items into nutritious meals. His team prepares approx-

imately 1,000 On the Spot Nutrition meals daily, using wholesome ingredients and cooking from scratch, including breads. The kitchen also uses produce from local farms that might be difficult to sell due to cosmetic defects.

Erika Carstensen, Director of Supply Chain and Analytics, shared insights on partnerships with local farms and producers. She emphasized the food bank’s commitment to fresh, locally sourced food, highlighting programs like Range to Table and Farm to Fight Hunger. These initiatives have resulted in over 13,600 servings of high-quality protein donated in one month and ensure that at least 50% of distributed food is fresh produce.

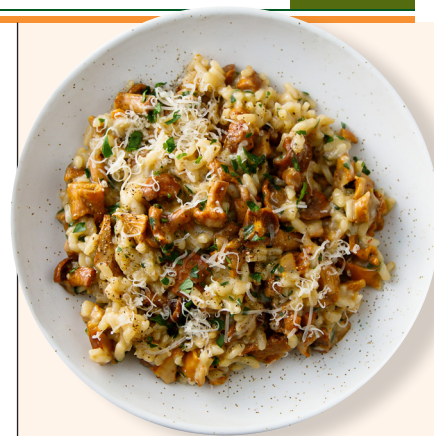
Colin Davidson, Food Resources Manager, discussed the Grocery Recovery program, revealing that the food bank makes 60 to 70 stops per week at major retailers and grocery stores throughout Sonoma County. This effort, combined with their partners, results in recovering 150,000 to 200,000 pounds of food monthly.

Jessica Hernandez, Director of Programs, provided a comprehensive overview of USDA Foods, detailing the funding, stakeholders, programs, and beneficiaries across their five-county service area. She emphasized the crucial role of participant feedback in shaping the USDA Foods procurement process, highlighting the importance of client surveys and choice-based distribution methods.

The tour concluded with an immersive experience at a mock distribution site, designed to mirror a real food distribution environment. This setup featured a diverse array of food items presented in a market-style format, offering visitors a tangible glimpse into the dignified and empowering experience of receiving assistance from the Redwood Empire Food Bank.

The successful inaugural event not only educated donors about the food bank’s operations but also deepened their connection to the organization’s mission of ending hunger in our community. The Redwood Empire Food

Bank plans to host similar experiences in the future, building on the enthusiastic response from attendees. 🌱



Mushroom Risotto

45 minutes, serves 4 to 6

INGREDIENTS

- 4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1½ pounds Shiitake and Maitake mushrooms
- ¾ teaspoon sea salt, plus more to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 2 medium shallots, chopped
- 1 garlic clove, finely chopped
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves
- 1½ cups uncooked Arborio rice, rinsed
- 5 cups warmed vegetable or chicken broth
- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese, plus more for serving
- Chopped fresh parsley, for garnish

DIRECTIONS

1. Heat 2 tablespoons of the olive oil in a Dutch oven or large, deep skillet over medium heat. Add the mushrooms, ½ teaspoon of the salt, and several grinds of pepper and toss to coat. Cook, stirring only occasionally, for 8 minutes, or until soft and browned. Remove from the pan and set aside. Work in batches if necessary.
2. Wipe out the pan and return it to the heat. Add the remaining 2 tablespoons olive oil, the shallots, garlic and the remaining ¼ teaspoon sea salt. Cook, stirring occasionally, for 5 to 8 minutes, or until softened. Stir in the thyme, and rice. Stir and cook for 1 to 3 minutes.
3. Add the broth ¾ cup at a time, stirring constantly and allowing each addition of broth to be absorbed before adding the next. With the final addition of broth, stir two-thirds of the sautéed mushrooms into the risotto. Cook until the risotto is creamy and the rice has a slight al dente bite. Stir in the cheese and season to taste.
4. Top with the remaining sautéed mushrooms, garnish with parsley, and serve with more grated cheese, if desired.

